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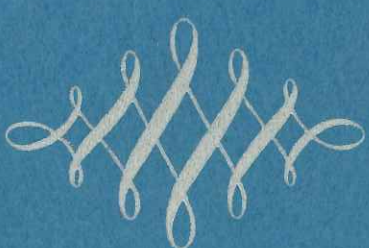
A Plated Article

BY CHARLES DICKENS



APR 29 1935
U. S. PAT

A Plated Article

BY CHARLES DICKENS

PUBLISHED IN "HOUSEHOLD WORDS" IN 1852

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PUTTING up for the night in one of the chiefest towns of Staffordshire, I find it to be by no means a lively town.

I have paced the streets and stared at the houses, and am come back to the blank bow window of the Dodo; and the town clocks strike seven. I have my dinner and the waiter clears the table, leaves me by the fire with my pint decanter, and a little thin funnel-shaped wine-glass and a plate of pale biscuits — in themselves engendering desperation.

No book, no newspaper!

What am I to do? To burn the biscuits will be but a fleeting joy; still, it is a temporary relief, and here

they go on the fire! Shall I break the plate? First, let me look at the back and see who made it: Spode.

Spode! Stop a moment. Was it yesterday I visited the Spode works and saw them making plates? In the confusion of travelling about it might be yesterday or it might be yesterday month; but I think it was yesterday. I appeal to the plate. The plate says, decidedly, yesterday.

Don't you remember (says the plate) how you steamed away yesterday morning in the bright sun, and the east wind, along the valley of the sparkling Trent?

And don't you remember (says the plate) how you alighted at Stoke—a picturesque heap of houses, kilns, smoke, wharves, canals, and river lying (as was most appropriate) in a basin—and how, after climbing up the sides of the basin to look at the prospect, you trundled down again at a walking-match pace, and straight proceeded to my father's—SPODE'S—where the whole of my family, high and low, rich and poor, are turned out upon the world from our nursery and seminary, covering some fourteen acres of ground? And don't you remember what we spring from—heaps of lumps of clay, partially prepared and cleaned in Devonshire and Dorsetshire, whence said clay principally comes—

and hills of flint, without which we should want our ringing sound and should never be musical? And as to the flint, don't you recollect that it is first burnt in kilns, and is then laid under the four iron feet of a demon slave, subject to violent stamping fits, who, when they come on, stamps away insanely with his four iron legs, and would crush all the flint in the Isle of Thanet to powder without leaving off? And as to the clay, don't you recollect how it is put into mills, or teazers, and is sliced, and dug, and cut at, by endless knives, clogged and sticky, but persistent — and is pressed out of that machine through a square trough, whose form it takes—and is cut off in square lumps and thrown into a vat, and there mixed with water and beaten to a pulp by paddle wheels—and is then run into a rough house, all rugged beams and ladders splashed with white—where it passes through no end of machinery-moved sieves all splashed with white, arranged in an ascending scale of fineness (some so fine that three hundred silk threads cross each other in a single square inch of their surface), and all in a violent state of ague, with their teeth for ever chattering and their bodies for ever shivering? And as to the flint again, isn't it mashed and mollified and troubled and

soothed, exactly as rags are in a paper-mill, until it is reduced to a pap so fine that it contains no atom of "grit" perceptible to the nicest taste? And as to the flint and the clay together, are they not, after all this, mixed in the proportion of five of clay to one of flint; and isn't the compound—known as "slip"—run into oblong troughs, where its superfluous moisture may evaporate; *and, finally, isn't it slapped and banged and beaten and patted and kneaded and wedged and knocked about like butter, until it becomes a beautiful grey dough ready for the potter's use?

In regard to the potter, popularly so called (says the plate), you don't mean to say you have forgotten that a workman called a Thrower is the man under whose hand this grey dough takes the shape of the simpler household vessels as quickly as the eye can follow? You don't mean to say you cannot call him up before you, sitting, with his attendant woman, at his potter's wheel —a disc about the size of a dinner plate, revolving on two drums slowly or quickly, as he wills—who made

*Superseded by the hydraulic press invented by Messrs. Needham & Kite, and first used and perfected by the late Alderman Copeland in 1856 again superseded in 1922 by latest electrical generator and installation.

you a complete breakfast set for a bachelor, as a good-humoured little off-hand joke? You remember how he took up as much dough as he wanted, and, throwing it on his wheel, in a moment fashioned it into a teacup—caught up more clay and made a saucer—a larger dab and whirled it into a teapot—winked at a smaller dab and converted it into the lid of the teapot, accurately fitting by the measurement of his eye alone—coaxed a middle-sized dab for two seconds, broke it, turned it over at the rim, and made a milk-pot—laughed, and turned out a slop-basin—coughed, and provided for the sugar? Neither, I think, are you oblivious of the newer mode of making various articles, but especially basins, according to which improvement a mould revolves instead of a disc? For you *must* remember (says the plate) how you saw the mould of a little basin spinning round and round, and how the workman smoothed and pressed a handful of dough upon it, and how with an instrument called a profile (a piece of wood representing the profile of a basin's foot) he cleverly scraped and carved the ring which makes the base of any such basin, and then took the basin off the lathe like a doughey skull-cap to be dried, and afterwards (in what is called a "green" state) to be put into

a second lathe, there to be finished and burnished with a steel burnisher? And as to moulding in general (says the plate), it can't be necessary for me to remind you that all ornamental articles, and indeed all articles not quite circular, are made in moulds? For you *must* remember how you saw the vegetable dishes, for example, being made in moulds; and how the handles of teacups, and the spouts of teapots, and the feet of tureens, and so forth, are all made in little separate moulds, and are each stuck on to the body corporate of which it is destined to form a part, with a stuff called "slip," as quickly as you can recollect it?

Further, you learnt — you *know* you did — in the same visit, how the beautiful sculptures in the delicate new material called Parian are all constructed in moulds; how into that material animal bones are ground up, because the phosphate of lime contained in bones makes it translucent; how everything is moulded, before going into the fire, one-fourth larger than it is intended to come out of the fire, because it shrinks in that proportion in the intense heat; how, when a figure shrinks unequally, it is spoiled—emerging from the furnace a mis-shaped birth: a big head and a little body, or a little head and a big body, or a

SPODE'S WICKER DALE

SPODE'S FAIRY DELL

Quasimodo with long arms and short legs, or a Miss Biffin with neither legs nor arms worth mentioning!

And as to the Kilns, in which the firing takes place, and in which some of the more precious articles are burnt repeatedly, in various stages of their process towards completion — as to the Kilns (says the plate, warming with the recollection), if you don't remember THEM with a horrible interest, what did you ever go to Spode's for? When you stood inside of one of those inverted bowls of a Pre-Adamite tobacco pipe, looking up at the blue sky through the open top far off, as you might have looked up from a well sunk under the centre of the pavement of the Pantheon at Rome, had you the least idea where you were? No (says the plate), of course not! And when you found that each of those pillars was a pile of ingeniously made vessels of coarse clay — called Saggars — looking, when separate, like raised-pies for the table of the mighty Giant Blunderbore and now all full of various articles of pottery ranged in them in baking order, the bottom of each vessel serving for the cover of the one below, and the whole Kiln rapidly filling with these, tier upon tier, until the last workman should have barely room to crawl out before the closing of the jagged aperture in

the wall, and the kindling of the gradual fire; did you not stand amazed to think that all the year round these dread chambers are heating, white hot—and cooling—and filling—and emptying—and being bricked up—and broken open — humanly speaking, for ever and ever? To be sure you did! And standing in one of those Kilns nearly full, and seeing a free crow shoot across the aperture a-top, and learning how the fire would wax hotter and hotter, by slow degrees, and would cool similarly, through a space of from forty to sixty hours, did no remembrance of the days when human clay was burnt oppress you? Yes, I think so! I suspect that some fancy of a fiery haze and a shortening breath, and a growing heat, and a gasping prayer; and a figure in black interposing between you and the sky (as figures in black are very apt to do), and looking down, before it grew too hot to look and live, upon the Heretic in his edifying agony—I say I suspect (says the plate) that some such fancy was pretty strong upon you when you went out into the air, and blessed God for the bright spring day and the degenerate times!

After that I needn't remind you what a relief it was to see the simplest process of ornamenting this "biscuit" (as it is called when baked) with brown circles

and blue trees—converting it into the common crockery-ware that is exported to Africa, and used in cottages at home. For (says the plate) I am well persuaded that you bear in mind how those particular jugs and mugs were once more set upon a lathe and put in motion; and how a man blew the brown colour (having a strong natural affinity with the material in that condition) on them from a blow-pipe as they twirled; and how his daughter, with a common brush, dropped blotches of blue upon them in the right places; and how, tilting the blotches upside down, she made them run into rude images of trees, and there an end.

And didn't you see (says the plate) planted upon my own brother that astounding blue willow, with knobbed and gnarled trunk and foliage of blue ostrich feathers, which gives our family the title of "willow pattern"? And didn't you observe, transferred upon him at the same time, that blue bridge which spans nothing, growing out from the roots of the willow; and the three blue Chinese going over it into a blue temple, together with the rest of that amusing blue landscape which has, in deference to our revered ancestors of the Cerulean Empire, and in defiance of every known law of perspective, adorned millions of our family ever since the days

of platters? Didn't you inspect the copper-plate on which my pattern was deeply engraved? Didn't you perceive an impression of it taken in cobalt colour at a cylindrical press, upon a leaf of thin paper, streaming from a plunge-bath of soap and water? Wasn't the paper impression daintily spread by a light-fingered damsel (you *know* you admired her!) over the surface of the plate, and the back of the paper rubbed prodigiously hard—with a long tight roll of flannel, tied up like a round of hung beef—without so much as ruffling the paper, wet as it was? Then (says the plate), was not the paper washed away with a sponge, and didn't there appear, set off upon the plate, *this* identical piece of Pre-Raphaelite blue distemper which you now behold? Not to be denied! I had seen all this—and more. I had been shown, at Spode's, patterns of beautiful design, in faultless perspective, which are causing the ugly old willow to wither out of public favour; and which, being quite as cheap, insinuate good wholesome natural art into the humblest households. When Mr. and Mrs. Sprat have "licked the platter clean" they can—thanks to modern artists, and clay — feast their intellectual tastes upon excellent delineations of natural objects.

This reflection prompts me to transfer my attention

from the blue plate to the forlorn but cheerfully painted vase on the sideboard. And surely (says the plate) you have not forgotten how the outlines of such groups of flowers as you see there are printed, just as I was printed, and are afterwards shaded and filled in with metallic colours by women and girls? As to the aristocracy of our order, made of the finer clay—porcelain peers and peeresses; the slabs, and panels, and table tops, and tazze; the endless nobility and gentry of dessert, breakfast, and tea services; the gemmed perfume bottles and scarlet-and-gold salvers — you saw that they were painted by artists, with metallic colours laid on with camel-hair pencils, and afterwards burnt in.

And talking of burning in (says the plate), didn't you find that every subject, from the willow pattern to the landscape after Turner—having been framed upon clay or porcelain biscuit—has to be glazed? Of course, you saw the glaze—composed of various vitreous materials—laid over every article. We had in my time—and I suppose it is the same now—fourteen hours' firing to fix the glaze and make it "run" all over us equally, so as to put a good shiny and unscratchable surface upon us; and upon this you saw some of the finest steel engravings transferred, to be fixed by a sub-

sequent firing in the "hard" kiln—didn't you? Why, of course you did!

Of course I did. So, listening to the plate's reminders, and musing upon them, I got through the evening after all, and went to bed. I made but one sleep of it—for which I have no doubt I am also indebted to the plate —and left the lonely Dodo in the morning, quite at peace with it.

THE home beautiful began with pottery. Natural beauty always existed, but it was the potter who first expressed man's appreciation of it by trying to give grace of form and charm of colour to the rude vessels used in the home life of primitive days. The jars in which primeval man stored his grain for the winter months were moulded by his bare hands on a boulder, rudely decorated, and dried in the sun. It was not long, however, before man discovered the magic power that fire has of transforming the soft clay into a hard substance; the potter's wheel was also the chief outcome of his experiments. Thus the kiln and the wheel were both known to all ancient civilizations, and

were the essential factors in the making of pottery from the earliest times to the present day.

Although English pottery did not achieve any importance until the eighteenth century, this country can congratulate itself on possessing a race of potters unsurpassed in the world. This is largely due to the craft having its chief centre in one district — the Staffordshire Potteries—where generations have learnt the art from father to son, and thus carried on the traditions of their founders: Elers, Wheildon, Wedgwood, and Spode.

Josiah Spode's name springs into fame in the year 1770, when, having successfully mastered the art of pottery making, Spode founded the factory which still bears his name coupled to that of Copeland. The fine quality of his productions made people quickly realize that the talents of Elers and Wheildon had found an exponent in Spode, and specimens of his work were immediately in great demand. Spode's fame was enhanced by his perfecting the process of transfer printing. This method of printing from copper engravings had already been in use for some fifteen or twenty years, but designs were confined to small plates, usually of pastoral scenes. Spode's crea-

SPODE'S WICKER LANE

16-A

16-B

SPODE'S ROSE BRIAR

tive mind saw wider possibilities, and by a clever adaptation of this process the world is indebted to him for those exquisite blue printed designs which are to-day an adornment to every home. John Ward records in his *History of Stoke,* published in 1843:

" The juncture at which he [Josiah Spode] entered
" . . . was of all others the most favourable for success-
" ful enterprise in a particular branch of trade: that of
" Blue Printed ware, which proved a mine of wealth to
" many potters of the last age, though disregarded by
" the great Josiah Wedgwood. In this line of business
" the Spodes attained acknowledged pre-eminence in
" the London market."

Josiah Spode's eldest son, also called Josiah, entered the business and became as famous as his father. To him must be given the credit of turning the manufacture of porcelain into a commercial success. Porcelain had been made at Chelsea, Bow, and Worcester as early as 1750, but the paste thus manufactured was of a soft nature, which, when fired, was very liable to become distorted. By his introduction of a mixture of felspar and bone ash into the porcelain Spode made the latter a practical success, and the Stoke potteries thus became

the centre of this branch of manufacture, a position which they still maintain.

The porcelain made by Spode's method was of a hard and more durable nature, and its pure whiteness so enhanced the beauty of any decoration that flowers painted on it equalled in appearance the famous work of Billingsley.

Spode, however, did not limit himself to the making of porcelain: in the year 1805 he perfected his Stone China, or Ironstone China. Whilst being of a charming greyish tint resembling Chinese porcelain, this Stone China was also of a harder nature. With polychrome decoration in the Chinese style, and enriched with gold, it became most popular both at home and on the Continent, being especially prized on account of its durability. We hear that in 1817 Queen Charlotte went specially to Stoke to see this new invention.

It is not perhaps generally known that Spode was equally clever in the designing of pottery in the Japan style, though credit for this is more often given to the factory at Derby. William Burton, however, writes that "as much of this decoration [Japan style] was produced " at Stoke as at Derby," and that "Spode's productions were superior to those of Bloor's Derby factory in their

solid gilding and workmanship." Of Spode the second, John Ward also records that "few men possessed a greater share of what is usually called public spirit." He actively promoted the formation of a troop of volunteer cavalry in the Potteries in 1798, of which he took the command as captain.

In the year 1797 Spode had taken into partnership Mr. William Copeland, himself a native of Stoke, who was engaged in business in London trading in tea with the East. It was mutually agreed that the making of teapots and cups and saucers should be associated with tea, for it is a well-known fact that only a China teapot can bring out the true flavouring of tea. The name of the firm became later Spode and Copeland. This partnership proved so successful that William Copeland put his only son, also called William, into the business. The factory increased and became the largest and most affluent one in the Potteries. It is recorded by Ward that they employed even in those days more than 800 people, and that the buildings covered over eight acres of ground, the factory of to-day still existing on its original site.

In 1838 (the second Josiah Spode having died six years previously) William Taylor Copeland, after-

wards Lord Mayor of London and M.P. for Stoke, purchased the entire interest from the trustees of Spode. To this second William Copeland we owe one of the most important advances in porcelain-making during the nineteenth century, i.e. the production of Parian. Parian is a biscuit porcelain somewhat resembling the material which the Derby factory had used for their famous Biscuit figures, the recipe at that time having been lost. The "new" recipe, while not so waxy-looking as the old, resembled a fine statuary marble. It became the rage, and enormous quantities of statuettes, busts, and ornamental pieces were produced, many from models designed by John Gibson, R.A., and J. H. Foley, R.A.

William Taylor Copeland was followed by his son Richard Pirrie Copeland, who carried on the sole management of the firm until 1913, when he was in turn succeeded by his two sons, Ronald and Gresham Copeland. The present owners firmly believe in the good taste of the public, and aim at producing nothing but the very best in quality, design, and colour. Beautiful and artistic objects are being made, with a richness of design and colouring which should please the most fastidious. Those who care for antiquity will delight

in the old-world patterns reproduced, for the firm still have the original designs and moulds made by Spode himself. Those who seek something more in harmony with modern conditions will also find a never-ending stock of original designs and new shapes.

The call to-day is for "progress": it is with the desire that noble inspirations and beauty may combine with utility that W. T. Copeland & Sons send their Spode ware out into the world. Many looking on the beautiful articles manufactured will marvel at the skill, patience, and enterprise that have made it possible for human hands to produce such things. The answer is that tradition still remains. Pride of workmanship, and the desire to make—for the benefit of mankind—beautiful specimens of the potter's art, inspire the workpeople to-day as they did in the days of the Spodes.

The present King and Queen of England visited the Spode-Copeland works in 1913, and many illustrious persons have been there before them. The great Charles Dickens himself passed that way, and recorded his impressions in the quaint story "A Plated Article."

SPODE-COPELAND TRADE MARKS

Used by the firm since its inception, 1770.

Spode

Spode

SPODE

Spode
Felspar
Porcelain

SPODE
Felspar Porcelain

SPODE
Stone-China

SPODE

Spode's
NEW FAYENCE

Spode's
Imperial

SPODE, SON
& COPELAND

or SPODE & COPELAND,

COPELAND AND GARRETT

COPELAND
& GARRETT

COPELAND & GARRETT
NEW
FAYENCE

COPELAND & GARRETT
LATE
SPODE
THE TIBER

Copeland
Late Spode.

Copeland Late Spode

COPELAND

Copeland
Stone China

COPELAND

COPELAND

COPELAND LATE SPODE

SPODE
COPELANDS CHINA
ENGLAND

COPELAND
late
SPODE
ENGLAND

Spode
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